

Seasons of Discovery

by JennyWeasley

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1. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Seasons of Discovery â€" The First Year

Seasons of Discovery

It was the most pleasant day Hogwarts had ever seen for its graduation ceremony. Warm breezes swept over the students' heads, mingling with the excited whispers and scattered applause. Hermione Granger stepped off the podium after giving her graduation speech, and smiled in the direction of her two best friends in the world, Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley, who were both waving from the back row.

When the lights came back on after the magical fireworks display, Hermione was shocked to see that the whole audience had swamped the auditorium, swirling her in a sea of strangers and friends. She looked desperately for Harry and Ron, wishing to tell them her good newsâ€| _I'm sure they'd want to know I got the letter, _she thought. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a tangled mop of flaming red hair floating a few inches over the rest of the crowd. "Ron! RON!" she yelled, but just as she was about to reach him,

-BAM-

"Hermione, dear, please watch where you're going."

"Harry! Oh Harry, I'm so glad to finally find you. I just lost Ron, he went that way," and she pointed towards the stage area. Despite being disappointed that she'd missed her chance to catch Ron, she couldn't wipe off the big goofy grin that was plastered across her face, and she nervously shifted from one foot to the other.

"Well, I guess you'll have to settle for me, then. So? Aren't you going to tell me why you can't stop smiling and squirming? This doesn't have to do with a certain letter from you-know-where, does it?" Harry smiled. She knew he'd never been any good at divination (she thought it was a bunch of nonsense), but Madame Trelawney couldn't have done better.

"I got in! IgotinIgotinIgotin!" Hermione jumped up and down as she squeezed her friend.

"Ouch! Darn it, Hermione, now you've gone and broken my foot!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Harry. I'm just so excited! And, what about you? Are you coming with me?" Harry still hadn't told her if he had decided to go to collegeâ€| she hoped someone was going to keep her company at Oxford's University of Magical Arts. Hermione's parents had always wanted her to go to their alma mater, but they never dreamed she'd end up going in robes and a pointed hat.

"Well, I've decided that I'll just be too busy to come full-time. Maybe a couple of classes here and there." Was that a smirk on Harry's face? What did he mean, too busy?

"Too busy? It's only 4 classes a semester to stay full-time, Harry â€| we've been taking more than that for the past 7 years!"

"True, but that's before I got a job!"

"What? You got a what?" Hermione couldn't believe he'd kept this a secret from her!

"I wanted to save it for a surprise. I got a job as an intern at the Ministry of Magic! Youngest intern in a century! Usually, they only take college seniors, but since I have so much experience dealing with Voldemort and stuff, they decided I could take classes while I work. Luckily, I still have some of the money my parents left me in Gringotts â€| I don't get a salary until I've been with the Ministry for 2 years. And I can stay with Sirius while I'm at school, so I don't have to pay rent! I can't believe it worked out so well!"

"So which department are you going to work for?" Hermione asked.

"Guess!"

"Umâ€| Magical Garbage Removal?" Hermione giggled.

"Ha ha. Guess again."

"Umâ€| Fashion Police?" Hermione snickered.

"You dope." Harry poked her in the arm. "You know where I had my heart set on working. I'm working for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures department!"

Hermione laughed. She knew this was a joke. After all that work in their third year to clear a hippogriff, and then having to rescue it themselves after the committee decided to execute it anyway, Harry would never consider a job in that part of the Ministry as his dream

career.

"Okay, okay, I give up. Tell me." Hermione smiled.

"I'm working under the minister himself as a researcher. No big thing, just a desk job, although I'm sure you'd love it â€" I'll have to spend most of my hours in the archives looking up things in books. Good thing you gave us all that practice in school." He poked her again. "Anyway, like I said, in two years I'll be working there for real â€" and working for the Minister will get my foot in the door of any department I want to work for!"

"Oh, Harry, I'm so happy for you!" She gave him a big hug.

"Oh hoâ€¦ so I leave you two for a second and come back to find you in each other's arms, huh?"

"Ron! Oh, shut up, you dolt. Guess what!"

Hermione and Harry spent the next half-hour rehashing everything they'd just told each otherâ€¦ although Ron ended up inventing much funnier fake Ministry departments than she had. Ah, that was the great thing about Ron. He had such a quick mind when it came to humor. _Just look at his face! He looks like he's cooking another joke up right now!_

"Wait a minute." Hermione interrupted Ron and Harry in the middle of one of their "do you remember the time Malfoyâ€¦" stories. Ron was looking very queer. "Ron, is there something you'd like to tell us?"

"What?" Ron blushed to the roots of his flaming hair. He looked like a boiled lobster with his scarlet Gryffindor house graduation robes on. "Oh, it's nothing."

"Hey, yeah, Hermione's right. It isn't nothing. Come on. Spit it out."

"Oh, really, it's nothing. I just found a job, that's all."

Hermione gave Ron a puzzled look. He looked WAY too excited for it to be just a job. "Ron, come on. We know you're lying. What's this job? It must be a big one to make you look like you just won a prize of a thousand galleons."

"Wellâ€¦ okay. Drumroll please." Ron waved his wand in the air, creating two drumsticks and a cymbal. The sticks did a quick roll on the folding chair next to him, crashed the cymbal, then disappeared with a faint **pop**. "My dad just told me that I received a letter yesterday at the Burrow. He gave it to me â€" here, why don't you read it for yourself." Ron handed Harry the letter, and Hermione looked over his shoulder as he read:

Dear Mr. Weasley,

—

We are pleased to announce that we've chosen you to be our new assistant coach. Please report to work on September 5th, after the current season has ended. You can pick up your coaching robes at the

back counter of Quality Quidditch Supplies in Diagon Alley. An apartment will be provided in the Cannon's training camp outside Exeter, and food will be taken with the team in the dining hall. Please send us your owl as soon as possible so that we can complete the necessary paperwork and be ready to welcome you to the team in the fall. Congratulations!

Sincerely,

Philip Veritas

Manager

Chudley Cannons

—

— "Oh, Ron! I can't believe it! I'm so happy for you!" Hermione grabbed the letter, rushed over to Ron and threw her arms around him, jumping up and down. "The Chudley Cannons! They've been your favorite team for ages, and now you're a coach! That's the best news yet!" And with that, she gave Ron a big kiss on the cheek (she had to jump to reach it).

"Oh, umâ€| yeahâ€| umâ€|. M-m-m-my family is umâ€| gotta goâ€| see ya laterâ€| umâ€| bye," Ron stammered, as he bolted from his spot. Hermione looked puzzled.

"What's wrong with him? He ran out of here so fast he forgot his letter! Is something the matter? Harry, you're his best friend, you shared a dorm room with him, do _you_ know what's up?"

Harry looked a little uncomfortable. "No, I have no idea what he's up to." Hermione didn't believe him for one second. For one thing, she could always tell when Harry was lying, because he always stuck his hands in his pockets. Which he was doing right now. For another, she could tell just by the way he was looking anywhere but at her face that something weird was going on here.

"Harry, I know you know something. What happened back there? Am I going to have to cast a truth-telling spell on you to get you to spill it?"

"Listen, Hermione, there's nothing wrong, okay? Here, give me Ron's letter â€" I'll find him and give it back to him. Don't worry, he's probably just overly excited about his job." Harry took Ron's letter and started off in the direction his friend had gone. Hermione grumbled. _Fine_, she thought. _If they're not going to tell me, I'm not going to ask. Although they're both acting like a couple of idiots._

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* * *

Hermione couldn't believe that time could fly so fast. It seemed like it was only yesterday that she and her classmates were graduating from Hogwarts, and here it was, the end of her first year at college already. She twisted her hands as she waited outside her advisor's office. In just a few minutes, Professor Hicks would be calling her

inside to ask her for her final decision on her degree specialty, and although she'd made up her mind ages ago, it was a big step. The door swung open slowly.

"Hermione Granger, please?"

"Right here." Hermione stood up. Her stomach churning, she walked inside and shut the door behind her.

"Ms. Granger! So good to see you." Professor Hicks was an intimidating witch, not because of her demeanor, which was perfectly pleasant, but because of her incredible genius. She'd written what seemed like half the books in the bookstore, and had numerous public appearances throughout the year that took up so much of her time that she'd been forced to stop teaching most of her classes. Hermione couldn't believe that she was actually in her office. "Ms. Granger, you know what I've called you in for. It's time. I need to know where you're going with your studies. Have you picked your major?"

"Oh, y-y-yes, Professor Hicks. I've chosen to study Rare and Undiscovered Potion ingredients." Hermione sat on the edge of her seat, waiting for a response.

"Hmmmâ€¦. You're sure? You've thought hard about this? Once you've taken the first step, it's very hard to go back and start over again."

What was she saying? Was this a sign? Was this a hint that she wouldn't be able to hack it in Professor Hicks' profession? Wasn't she the top student in the whole freshman class?

"I've thought hard, yes. Is there something wrong with that choice, Professor?"

Hermione was blinking her eyes and counting slowly to ten in her head, willing the tears away.

"Of course not! I just feel honored that you'd choose to study under me. Thanks for joining my team, Hermione!"

The next half-hour was a blur. When she finally left Professor Hicks' office (call me Mina, pleaseâ€¦), she had a stack of papers an inch thick in her back detailing the next two years' study. She couldn't believe it. Professor Hicks had decided to take the next 5 years to go to South America and collect plants from around the continent! And she was going along!

As soon as Hermione set foot in her small bedroom, she grabbed two sheets of parchment. She dug out two quills from her desk and pointed her wand at them. _Facsimilius,_ she muttered, and as she picked up one, the other one stood up on its own, copying her every move. She proceeded to write.

Dear Harry and Ron,

—

Sorry about the letter being copied for both of you. I just wanted to make sure that I said everything and didn't forget to mention something to one of you. You won't believe my good luck. I'm going to

Chile! I leave next month to start my study of rare potion ingredients (hopefully, I'll be in on a new discovery). I can't believe it. It still hasn't sunken in yet. I've decided to take the "long way" there. I've been all around Europe with my folks, but I've never crossed the ocean before, so instead of Apparating to South America, I've booked passage on a cruise ship. A cruise sounds so romantic, don't you agree? Anyway, I just want to remind you that you guys both have to send me owls as often as you can. I'm going to be all alone down there (well, okay, not alone. I just won't know anyone else that's going), and I'll need some letters to keep me company. Oh, another thing. Can either one of you take Crookshanks for me for a couple of years? They're not allowing pets (besides owls) on the expedition, and Mum's allergic. It was okay while I was at home to cast a filter spell on the house, but you know how temporary those things are â€" she wouldn't last a week.

Talk to you guys soon. I have to pick up some gear in Diagon Alley next Friday. Care to join me for a going-away dinner in style? Formal dress only, my treat. Hope to see you there.

Love from

Hermione

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* * *

Hermione sat at the steps leading up to _Monsieur Robert's _restaurant, her trunk beside her, full of the things she'd bought for her voyage to South America. She peered at a list she'd made up before she'd left home. _Expandable backpack â€" check. Insect repelling robes â€" check. No-Noise Hiking Boots â€" check. Ever-dry socks â€" check. Self-rinsing toothbrush â€" check. _She proceeded through the next two pages. _Okay, I think I remembered everything. _Hermione snapped her fingers and opened her evening bag. The trunk slowly levitated and started getting smaller, and smaller and smaller. _Snap!_ She shut the trunk in her bag, stood up, and brushed herself off. Ron should be coming any minute. Last night, she'd had a message from Harry saying that he couldn't make it because it was Dudley's birthday, and he wanted to give him a very special present (now that he wasn't restricted from using magic outside Hogwarts). He was sorry, but he'd see her off at the docks in the morning. Hermione wasn't too disappointed. _Besides, _ she thought to herself, _at least it'll be cheaper with only two people eating._ She giggled. She walked around to a window at street level and looked at her reflection. Her hair was tied up in a loose bun at the nape of her neck. Believe it or not, it had taken hours to get that way â€" she'd always hated how unmanageable her curly hair had been. It didn't look that bad tonight, though. The dress she'd found in the posh section of London â€" it was smashing. Dark blue and velvet, it was really too expensive to wear to a friendly dinner, but she just couldn't help herself. In any case, it was the last time for a while that she'd be able to wear something sleeveless â€" the mosquitoes in Chile were said to be monsters!

Ah ha! There he was, coming up the street from The Leaky Cauldron. And wearing a tux! Hermione couldn't believe it. He looked great!

"Hermione! Hey, wow, youâ€¦. You look fantastic!" Ron looked around. "Where's Harry?"

"He told me he couldn't come. Said he was going to Dudley's birthday party to give him a present he'd never forget, if you know what I mean. I thought he'd have mentioned it to you." Hermione was a little surprised that Ron hadn't talked to Harry before coming. They were best friends, after all.

"He's not coming? Ohâ€¦" Ron looked a little suspicious. "The sneaky b---"

"Ron!"

"Oh, sorryâ€¦. Nevermind. Well, that's okay. Ready to eat? I'm starving." Ron climbed the steps in front of Hermione and opened the door, not looking directly at her.

"You and your perpetually empty stomach. Will you ever stop growing? I swear, next time I see you, you'll be eight feet tall!" Hermione patted him on the arm as she passed by him into the dimly lit restaurant. If it had been lighter, she would have seen Ron turn pink up to his ears.

Dinner was fabulous. Course after course after course arrived, and when Hermione thought they were done, Ron STILL had room for dessert! "Uh huhâ€¦ I thought so. Trying to milk this free meal deal for all it's worth, huh?"

Ron grinned. As he plunged his spoon into an excellent crÃªme brulee, he whispered, "You know, the food at the dining hall isn't bad â€" honestly, sometimes, I find myself taking thirds! But this! Hermione, you have to taste this. I don't care if your stomach feels like it's going to burst. Just try it!" He handed her his spoon.

"Fine. Just a tiny bite." She took a bite. Her eyes rolled to the ceiling. _Oh, heavens, this is wonderful._ "Ron, you are absolutely right. This is the most delicious thing I have ever tasted." She handed him the spoon back. He took it, then scooped out another spoonful for himself. Hermione clutched her chest in a mock gasp and said, "Ron! Don't eat that! You might get cooties!"

Ron laughed and winked at her. "Umâ€¦ don't worry, I'll risk it."

Hermione smiled. She was having so much fun, she didn't think it could be better, even if Harry had been able to make it.

When dessert was finally over (Ron really dragged out those last few bites) and the check had been paid ("Wow, thanks Hermione â€" we should go to dinner more often!"), they took a walk down to The Leaky Cauldron, where Hermione was going to stay the night. They stopped outside the door back into the pub, Ron leaning on the trash bins.

"Okay, Ron, wait here. I'll go get Crookshanks for you and come right back down."

"Sure. I won't move a muscle." Ron whipped his wand out of his jacket pocket, pointed it at himself and muttered, "_petrificus totalus_."

He'd given himself the full-body bind! Hermione's hands were instantly clutching her stomach as she doubled up in laughter.

She ran up to her room, grabbed the wicker basket on the bed, and ran back down, stumbling on the last step, and barely staying upright. Damn heels, she thought, and she opened the door to the back courtyard. "Here he is, Ron. Thank you again soooooo much for taking him. I really appreciate it. Ron? Oh! Sorry!" Hermione reached for her wand and reversed the curse Ron had put on himself. "Sorry, did you get all that?"

"Of course. My ears weren't paralyzed, you know. And it's my pleasure to take your cat. He'd just better behave, or else he's out on the street!" He put on a frown and aimed a kick at the basket.

"Hey, now, at least wait until I'm gone, will you?" She smiled as he looked disappointed and put his foot back on the ground. There was silence for a minute, and then Ron started to speak.

"Um, Hermione, umâ€¦. I got you a going-away present." Ron slowly reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a tiny wrapped gift. "It's not much, but I wanted to give you something to keep with you to remember me when you're far from England."

Hermione took the small box. She grinned and shook it gently as she held it to her ear. Ron smiled. She slowly untied the ribbon and lifted the lid off the box. Inside was a tiny gold necklace â€" with a charm hanging from it. "A weasel?" she asked. Indeed, it was a small weasel.

"Yeah, I thought it'd be funny. Besides, it's not hard to remember who gave it to you, is it? Ron Weasel himself." He winked as he puffed out his chest. Hermione burst into laughter and threw her arms around him. "It's the best, Ron. But I don't need a necklace to remember you. You'd be awfully hard to forget, you know."

Ron held her tightly in his arms a little longer than was really necessary, then let go with a small sigh. Hermione looked at him. He looked a little strange. "Ron? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no, nothing more than usual. I guess I'll just miss having you around. Anyway, you'd better get to bed â€" you have to be up early tomorrow. Sorry I can't be there to see you off â€" I've got practice in the morning. I'll just have to say good-bye now." With that, he bent down and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "Goodbye, little Hermione. Come back home soon, okay?" He turned around, tapped the magic brick above the trashcans, picked up the small basket at his feet, and walked slowly out into Diagon Alley.

Hermione was taken aback. What had just happened here? She walked into the pub and up the stairs to the guest rooms. At the door of 202, she paused. Did what she think just happened actually happen? Ron had never kissed her before. Not even in play. Could heâ€¦?

She resolved to talk to Harry about it in the morning before she left. It would do her no good to agonize over it now. She needed to get her rest before tomorrow. I sure hope I can get to sleepâ€¦

* * *

Hermione checked out of the Leaky Cauldron early the next morning, and made her way through the empty streets of London towards the Heliport where she would board the helicopter that would take her to Portsmouth, where her ship was leaving. She took her time, as the helicopter would wait for her until she got there. She was still puzzled about what had happened last night, and was turning it over in her mind.

_Think, Hermione. You're a smart girl. Do you really think Ron likes you? What if he's just going to miss you and that's it? You're probably taking this all way too seriously. Just ask Harry about it in an inconspicuous way when you get to Portsmouth, and leave it at that, okay? _

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_She reached the heliport before she knew what had happened, and the next minute, she was flying over London (her broomstick had been magicked to Santiago along with most of her clothes and textbooks the week before), still thinking about the way Ron had acted last night.

Harry was waiting for her when she landed.

"Hi, Harry. Before I ask how last night went, we've got to make our way down to dock number 12." They took off at a swift walk, side by side. "Soâ€| how was Dudley's party?" Hermione giggled. She had a feeling it had been the best birthday party Harry'd ever been to.

"You should have seen it, Hermione, it was hilarious. First, I walked up to the door with my black travelling cloak on â€" it was a scream when Aunt Petunia opened the door and saw me thereâ€| literally!" Harry laughed and went on to describe the festivities of the night before. It sounded as if he'd had a lot of fun teasing the Dursleys and making them pay for the abuse they'd heaped on him as a child. When he ended the story, she laughed, but he noticed that she was acting a little distracted.

"So? Tell me about YOUR night last night!" He smiled and raised his eyebrows at her. Hermione looked at him. Well, now was the time. She might as well get it out into the open now.

"Harry, I'm just going to start telling you this, and I know it may sound stupid, but I'm just going to run the risk of looking foolish and tell you anyway," she blurted, and she began. "I had the most wonderful time last night, even though you weren't there. Ron and I were having a lot of fun, and he gave me this weasel on a chain and then before I went up to bed, he said he would miss having me around andâ€|" She ran out of breath.

"And he kissed you, didn't he?" Harry didn't sound surprised.

"You knew he would, didn't you! Harry, you big jerk, why didn't you warn me he was going to do that?" Hermione was furious. She bet that was why he'd skipped out on dinner â€" he'd always hated the Dursleys, he wouldn't have gone to the party unless he'd needed an excuse to miss her going-away dinner.

"Hermione, calm down. I had a feeling this was going to happen, and I wasn't really looking forward to it. Just sit down here on this bench, and I'll tell you all I know. Then you tell me what YOU know, okay?"

Hermione sat down and looked down at her lap as Harry spoke in whispers.

"Hermione, you must have realized by now that Ronâ€¦ well, Ron has had a bit of a crush on you for years. He's tried to hide it, knowing that you don't feel the same way, but most of the guys noticed it after a while. It's been really hard on him, and he doesn't want to lose you as a friend, so he's kept it to himself. He almost had a heart attack on graduation day when you kissed him â€" that's why he was so weird â€" and ever since then, he's been falling harder and harder for you. I hate to tell you this, because I don't know if you feel the same, and I'd hate to have your relationship with him change because of it, but it looks like he gave up on hiding it last night."

Hermione couldn't look up. It was true. Ron liked her. No, Ron loved her. What now?

"Harryâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I don't know what to say. Ron's my friend! I don't know what to do! I don't love him that way, Harry â€" I've never thought about him in any way but as a friend â€" and now I'm leaving and I have to deal with this?!? It's too much!"

Harry sighed. "I had a feeling it would be like this. Listen. Don't mention it to him. He'll think you didn't even notice and he'll just go on with his life. He's not going to give up on your friendship because you don't feel the same way about him. But I have a feeling it would cause more harm than good if you told him your feelings straight out. Just let him get over you while you're gone. He's a smart boy. He'll know how you feel when you don't bring it up in your letters."

Ignore it? Could she do that? Well, it was worth a try.

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"I'll try to act as normally as possible, Harry, thanks. I'm sorry it worked out this way â€" I can't imagine my life without Ron, butâ€¦ well, you know."

"I know. I can't imagine my life without you, but I'd never marry you, you hag." Harry shoved her playfully, and her smile came back.

There was a sudden blast of a horn, and she realized that the dock had slowly become crowded with people. "Harry! I'm sorry, I've got to get on the boat. Thanks for seeing me off â€" and for clearing things up. Goodbye, fabulous, famous Harry Potter â€" save a place in your fan club for me for when I get back." She hugged him quickly, then picked up her trunk (which was still shrunk small enough to fit in her knapsack) and ran up the plank onto the deck. When she reached a clear spot along the railing, she picked him out of the crowd and waved. He waved back, and as the ship started moving away from the dock, he grew smaller and smaller. Finally, she couldn't see him

anymore. She sighed, and started out on the first leg of her adventure " the search for her cabin.

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{Disclaimer: All characters are the property of J.K. Rowling, except for Professor Hicks. She is a product of my imagination, and in no way is meant to resemble any specific person, living or dead.}

A/N: Please don't flame me if I got any or all of my British geography wrong. I've never been there, nor do I have any idea how many docks/piers are in Portsmouth, nor am I even sure that cruise ships dock there. Either give me a break, or review this story and set me straight.

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2. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Seasons of Discovery " Part Two

Seasons of Discovery " Part Two

September 28th

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Dear Harry and Ron,

—

Guess who! Yep, it's your friendly, Chilean ambassador (should that be ambassadress? Ambassadrix? Anyway!). How's it going? Ministry treating you okay? How's Sirius? Has he gotten over that cold yet? Hope he's feeling better " give him my best. How are the Cannons doing so far this season? I know they got knocked out early last year for the World Cup, but you only have another 4 seasons to go before you'll be in the running again, I'm sure of it. Besides, with Mr. Weasel himself (ha ha ha) as a coach, they can't lose.

Well, Professor Hicks and I (sorry, I know I should be calling her Mina, but she's a teacher! You have no idea how weird it is to call a teacher by her first name) are hitting it off well. The group went into Achacachi (near Lake Titicaca) last week, and we thought we found the skull to a rare animal generically known as a "tricorn" (you know, like unicorn and bicorn), but it ended up being a deer with a bone abnormality. We were all disappointed, until late that night while camping out, I squashed a bug with my shoe, and realized I'd stumbled on to a new species of spitting-beetle! I gave it to the professor, and we've mailed it to the Ministry's Entymological Society, and we hope to have an owl back within the week.

I love it here in Chile. I still haven't made too many friends yet, but I think I've found a really good one in one of our guides named Carlos. He is exceptionally bright, and I've never had so much fun learning Spanish! He's promised to take me mountain climbing the first break we get. Imagine! Me! Climbing in the Andes! It's just too much.

You won't believe this, but I've got a classmate here who knows Ron! Okay, he doesn't know him, but his cousin works with a friend of Bill's in Egypt. I suppose it's not a very close relationship, is it? But every once in a while, he has a bit of Weasley family gossip for me that I love to hear. Of course, everyone knows about you, Harry, but nobody seems to know you personally, so I never hear gossip about Potter. What a rip-off. I'm friends with the most famous wizard of our time, and I'm the one expected to know all the juicy stories. Ha! Ron, you'll have to send me some to appease the masses.

Well, I've got to go. It's lunch-time, and if we don't eat now, the fire ants will be in camp in minutes, and that is just NOT a pretty sight.

Love,

Hermione

* * *

October 10th

Dear Hermione,

Harry, here. Things in the Ministry are fine, but very very busy. They have me working almost every night until 10:00 going over papers and speeches and press releases for mistakes. It's so tedious, I don't know if I can stand it much longer. I've got a little help with my college work, though. Ginny Weasley is taking a couple of classes with me this year, and I thought I'd ask for her to help me out. You know how bad I was at studying unless you were with me. So â€" I got a new study partner. Hope you don't mind.

Sirius is much better, he says, but I don't really believe it. He's still coughing up a storm and won't go to the doctor! I keep trying to tell him that it's just going to get worse, but he thinks he can cure himself. Well, I'll just let him figure it out for himself. I swear, sometimes I feel like I'm the older one.

Chudley's doing fine. By the way, Hermione, it's only 3 years until the next world cup. Remember? The last one was right after we graduated Hogwarts. We've already gone through one year, so that leaves three. I thought you were good at math! Anyway, Ron's going to see that and have a fit â€" you're going to get it now. At least you won't have to worry about getting a howler or anything. Ever since we got that one in our second year, Ron's been mortally afraid of them, and he won't touch one. Not even to send it.

That's all for now.

Always,

Harry.

P.S. Just between you and meâ€" I think Ron is doing much better. You know, about his crush on you. He hasn't mentioned you in a while. Maybe he's just doing a really good job of hiding it, I can't tell. Anyway, you take care, and I'll try to see if I can arrange some time off so that I can come out to visit you for lunch or something.

* * *

October 12th

Dear Hermione,

Hello? Anyone in there? We've only got three seasons left until the next World Cup, you nut! Sometimes I wish we had four, because although we're improving, we're never going to be champions the way we're progressing now. Oh well, there's only so much a genius like myself can accomplish. I can't work miracles, you know. Ha ha, just kidding. Besides, I'm just an assistant. I think they hired me because I'll work for absolute peanuts just to eat next to the team. Right now, they have me training the Beaters. I have to admit, I hate it, because the best way to train a Beater is to be a target for him or her, and guess who gets to be the target! Me! The better they get, the more black and blue I get. I don't think I'm going to live to see the next World Cup.

I was surprised when you didn't ask about Crookshanks. Well, I have bad news. He's still alive. Just kidding again. About the bad news part, not about him still being alive, that is. He is alive, and I suppose it's good news, although my couch is now all torn up. Darn cat. I bet you'll say it's because he misses you, although I personally think it's because he hates my couch. No hard feelings. It's an ugly couch.

I heard that Harry is thinking about Apparating out there to see you sometime. I thought about doing the same, but then I looked at my new schedule. There's just no time. Every free minute I have has to be spent eating and sleeping. Now, you could always come and visit me â€" I just can't promise to be here.

Speaking of Harryâ€¦I heard some gossip, and you said you wanted some. Turns out that he's been studying with my sister. Ok, you probably know that already. Here's the really juicy stuff. Ginny told Mom that she thinks he's going to ask her out. I don't know if it's true; he certainly hasn't told ME anything about wanting to date my sister, but you DID say you wanted rumors.

Okay, I've spent half my lunch break on this letter. I've really got to go. You know me and my "perpetually empty stomach". I wouldn't be surprised if you could hear it growling in South America. Talk to you later, Hermione.

Love,

Ron

* * *

January 15th

Dear Harry,

Thank you so much for coming out to visit last week! Didn't I tell you that Carlos was going to be fun to hang out with? Too bad Ron couldn't come. He would have liked him, too. Tell me something. Why didn't you bring Ginny along? I'm sure she missed you while you were gone, you sly dog, you. Not telling me you two were dating. How could

you?!? I'll never forgive you for that, Harry James Potter, you
RAT!

Okay, I lied. I forgive you.

I'd love to tell you that our tiny vacation gave all of us new energy in our research, but it wouldn't be true. It seems now that we're worse than ever. All we ever talk about is what we did while we weren't working. Maybe I'll go stomping around the campground later tonight and see what sticks to the bottom of my shoe. You never know â€" I got lucky last time, remember? Oh, I forgot to tell you â€" the Ministry is letting me name the new species of spitting-beetle. I haven't decided on a name yet. You think Ron would be insulted or excited if I named it after him? Ha ha, just kidding.

Give me some news about the homeland. I only hear third or fourth-hand gossip from Jack. He keeps telling me stuff like, "Hey Herm." (I hate Herm. It sounds like germ. Or someone clearing their throat. How hard is it to add another three syllables?) "My cousin told me that Bill told his friend that his little brother is engaged!" Now, that could be so many different brothers that it means nothing to me. Have you heard anything about that?

Love,

Hermione

* * *

February 9th

Dear Hermione,

First things first. I didn't tell you I was dating Ginny for a few reasons. One, I didn't know if we were actually dating. I had kind of thought we were, but I didn't want to assume that SHE thought we were dating â€" oh, it's all too confusing. Anyway, I'm sorry. We're dating. Happy? (I am)

Second. I stepped on some gum yesterday. You think you could use that in a potion? I'll send you what I can scrape off. Look for it wrapped up in a separate piece of parchment.

Third. No wait, I have to say that I can't stop laughing at the thought of you peeling off this piece of gum and throwing it in a cauldron. Ha ha ha! You'll have to take a picture of that.

Now. Third. I hadn't heard any rumors that a Weasley was getting married, but I haven't been to the Burrow in ages. Of course, I AM dating one, so I think you can consider me a reliable source. Percy is dating someone new, though. And I think Fred has a girlfriend. But nothing more serious than that.

Speaking of Sirius (ha ha ha), I slipped him that pill you made up while we were together, and it seems to have worked. His ego has shrunk considerably, and he actually made an appointment to see the doctor the other day. You're a real handy person to know, Hermione Granger.

Oh, and about Ron liking Carlos. I'm not sure. I'd have to see them together. I have a feeling that Carlos is just not his type, though. I'll send him one of the pictures, though, and see if it's love-at-first-sight.

Always,

Harry

P.S. No, I'm not stupid. I was just kidding about the Carlos thing. Geez, Hermione, you take things so seriously.

* * *

March 20th

Dear Harry,

Is it true? Is Ron really dating Lavender Brown? He always thought she was silly at Hogwarts. Remember when Professor Trelawney told Parvati Patil to "beware a red-haired man?" She and Lavender (those two were the silliest girls I've ever known!) shunned him ever since. Anyway, it seems strange hearing news like that from Jack. He lords it over me whenever he tells me something I haven't heard. Sort of like Malfoy used to act at school. Always letting the air out of your sails. What a jerk. Anyway, I'd like to hear if it's true.

Love,

Hermione

* * *

April 3rd

Dear Hermione,

I actually went out on a date with Ron three nights ago. Wow, that sounds bad. I didn't go as Ron's date, we doubled. I went with Ginny, he went with Lavender. He seemed to be having fun (although I can't see what's so great about her)! I can't believe he managed to get a night off. It must have been because he got creamed by a bludger the day before. The Cannons must have realized he's been working too hard. I hope they know they're never going to find a better coach anywhere. They're just taking him for granted.

Now it's my turn to tell you about the gossip I've heard. Ron told me that Bill told him that a friend of his has a cousin in Chile right now (I'm sure this relationship isn't new to you. Jack, I believe, is the cousin in question). Anyway, Ron said he heard that you're "head-over-heels in love" with that Carlos guy. How about that! So? Any truth to these rumors?

Uh oh, Minister's coming. I'd better go now.

Harry

* * *

May 20th

Dear Harry and Ron,

I have to make this quick, the group is leaving for the main camp any minute.

I get exactly two weeks off for the summer. I'm coming back to England on June the 5th. I'll be spending the vacation with my parents, but I have time to see you two before I leave again for S.A. Any chance of arranging a meeting? Let me know. I'll be in London on the 16th.

Love,

Hermione

* * *

—

Hermione sat on the steps outside Flourish and Blotts. Any minute now, and she'd see them. Today was going to be as much like old times as she could make it. After tonight, she knew that nothing was going to be the same. Not after they heard the news.

There they were! Were they holding ice cream cones?

"You guys! It IS just like old times!" Hermione said, as she took the cone Harry handed out to her. Though it had only been a year since she'd seen them last, she couldn't believe how much the two of them had changed, but how much they both looked the same. Harry was truly grown up now. Tall and handsome, but still with that untidy mop of jet-black hair on his head. Ron was still tall, and his hair was as red as ever, but he wasn't gangly anymore. He had definitely learned how to manage his long limbs. Apparently, he'd been filling out, too. All that exercise must have been doing him good â€" she could actually see the muscles through his t-shirt. Could this really be Ron?

The three of them sat silently looking at each other while they ate their ice cream. Now that the time had actually come to be like their old selves, it was awkward. What could they say?

Hermione finally HAD to say something. "So. How are Ginny and Lavender?" It was the only thing that came to mind. Ron and Harry looked at each other. Ron nodded for Harry to go first.

"Well, I suppose I'll tell you about Ginny, even though Ron could tell you about her just as well as I could." Harry smiled, and continued. "See, I didn't want to tell you in a letter, and when you suggested coming here to meet in person, I saved the news for todayâ€"!"

Hermione laughed. "Don't tell me. You guys have decided to get married."

Harry looked shocked. "How did you know? Ron! You told her, you b---"

"No I didn't! I swear! Why would I tell her such a thing?" Ron stammered.

Hermione laughed again. "Harry, it's written all over your face. I'm not stupid, remember? I could see it coming a mile away. After all, she liked you the whole time we were at Hogwarts â€" it just took you a year in the 'real world' to figure out that you felt the same way." The three of them relaxed. _Whew,_ thought Hermione. _I sure am glad I'm not the only one with news today. It makes it much easier to tell them mine. Butâ€| maybe I should wait a little longer. I'll tell them after dinner._

--

"Hey, Ron. You haven't told me about Lavender yet. How's she doing?" Hermione smiled at her friend, who was looking strangely calm. He'd always gotten so flustered when she'd mentioned girls before, and as for her personal experience with him, she knew he was acting different. _He must have really changed while I've been gone_, she thought.

"Oh, she's fine. Let's go. I want to take you guys to the Cannons' compound. I'll buy you two lunch at the dining hall, then we'll have a fly around the stadium. The team is taking a break during the summer, so we'll have it all to ourselves." Ron stood up and took Harry and Hermione by the arms. "Come on, you slowpokes! We don't have all day, you know!" With a ****pop****, the three of them disappeared, and Apparated about a half-mile away from the Chudley Cannon's training camp in Exeter.

Despite Ron's grumbling, they took their time getting to lunch. Hermione reminded him that they had to walk off the ice cream before they'd be ready for lunch. So all along the way, they talked about everything and nothing. Harry mentioned that he'd seen Hagrid at the ministry the other day. Turns out he'd been doing errands for Hogwarts, and had stopped by while he was in the area. Ron mentioned that Malfoy had actually come to the Cannons' training camp to try out for the team, but as soon as he'd found out that Ron was an assistant coach, he'd made up some excuse for being there and left. They all had a few laughs over this. Hermione was still giggling about it when they sat down with their trays.

They were finishing up their meals when Hermione noticed a young woman with red hair walking toward them. "Oh my goodness, is that Ginny? She's grown up!" The boys laughed at her open mouth.

"Hermione, have you looked at yourself lately? You're not twelve anymore, either," Harry said.

"Harry, I'm so glad you're here â€" I didn't know where else I could look for you. Did you forget our appointment for this afternoon?" Ginny was a little out of breath, and she looked more than a little annoyed.

"Of course I didn't forget!" (Hermione didn't buy that for a minute. She could tell he'd forgotten.) "I just wanted to say hi to Hermione and take a quick fly with Ron before I went to meet you. I promise, I won't be more than ten minutes." _Boy,_ thought Hermione, _he sure knew how to charm his way out of trouble._

Ginny pointed her finger at Harry and put on her best impression of her mother. "You'd better not be more than ten minutes, mister. Ron, you know better than to cross me. If you keep him up there longer, you're going to get it!" They all burst into laughter again, and Hermione's sides were aching all the way to the stadium.

Harry and Ron took a few laps around the field while Ginny and Hermione sat in the stands. Ginny looked over at Hermione, who'd been marveling at how much Ron's flying had improved. "Hermione, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Would you be my maid of honor? I know this is out of the blue, but you know I don't have any sisters of my own, and even though we were a year apart in school, I always considered you one of my best friends. I know that Harry would really want you to be a part of our wedding. What do you think?" Ginny looked at her with her hands in her lap, waiting for Hermione to say something.

"Ginny, I'd be honored to be your maid of honor, but don't you think I should be something like a bridesmaid? I'll probably be able to get time off for the wedding itself, but I don't think I'll be able to help you with planning or writing or shopping or anything."

"Don't worry about that. I swear, my mother's got the whole wedding planned already, and it's ten months from now! I think she was so excited to finally have a girl in the family after six boys that she started planning it when I was eight." The two girls giggled.

"Okay, if you insist! Count me in!"

"That's great! I'll tell Harry and my family â€" they'll be really pleased! And now, I believe the boys have used up their ten minutes. I'll just put a little sputtering charm on their broomsticks to give them the hintâ€"|" Ginny muttered a few choice words. Harry and Ron started to bounce around in midair, looking around to see what had been going on. Ginny waved as Harry looked at her with a funny face, and the girls both laughed as they landed, their brooms giving a final jolt and bucking them off onto the ground.

"Okay, okay, I get the hint. See you later, Ron, Hermione. I'd better be off with the ol' ball and chain. Ouch! Just kidding, dear." Harry waved, and walked out of the stadium hand-in-hand with his sweetheart.

"Guess that just leaves the two of us. Care to go back to Diagon Alley and take a little walk, Hermione?" Ron put his and Harry's broomsticks back in the storage locker, then came back to Hermione with a smile on his face.

"Sure. Did you have anywhere you wanted to go in particular?"

"Nope. Just wanted to take a walk." Ron held her elbow as he steered her toward the exit. His fingers felt cool on her skin. She felt the familiar wave come over her as she dematerialized, then watched as Gringotts bank slowly came into focus. They set off towards The Leaky Cauldron at a very slow walk. "Great, now we can catch up! Sorry we haven't kept in touch as much as we'd planned â€" I'm not the best

letter-writer, you know," Ron said.

"How could I not know? I think I got a grand total of three letters this year, Ron. I know you're busy, but three?"

"I'm sorry. I'd sit down to write you a quick note, and then think of eight or nine more things to say, then eight or nine more, and by the time I'd realized that I didn't have time to write them all down, my break would be over and it'd be time for me to go back to work. Here, we can sit down, and I'll make up for lost time now." Ron took out a ballpoint pen from his pocket (a Muggle gift from Hermione during their fifth year in school — Ron's pockets had been getting very inky from carrying quills around) and started writing in the air. "Dear Hermione. How is Chile? Is the weather nice? Found any new —"

"Stop, Ron. I get the idea. Why don't we just catch up normally? Why don't you fill me in on how Lavender's doing?"

"Sure." Ron smiled. "Harry's not the only one getting married next year."

"What? Ron, are you joking?" Hermione couldn't keep the shocked look from her face.

"Me? Joke? Okay, I usually do, but not now. Lavender's getting married, too!"

Hermione's stomach did a funny little waltz. It was awfully soon for Ron to think about getting married. Wasn't it? "Wow, Ron. I guess congratulations are in order."

"I'll pass that on to her. I'm sure she'll appreciate it." He smiled.

"So, when's the big day?" Hermione still couldn't believe that Ron was going to marry Lavender Brown. Lavender Brown! They'd despised each other all during school!

"Don't know. You'll have to ask her."

"What, the groom doesn't even have any input into his own wedding date?"

Ron laughed. "I don't know. I doubt Dean cares —" as long as he finally marries her in the end."

"What? Dean? I thought you said — wait. Lavender is marrying DEAN?" Hermione's head was swimming.

"Of course! Who else would she be marrying?" Ron winked.

"Ron, you stinker, I thought she was marrying you!"

"Oh, come on, Hermione. You know I couldn't marry Lavender. She's not the girl for me." Hermione's stomach did another flip-turn. _Oh, no, _ she thought. _This is NOT going like I planned._

"How about we walk to the Leaky Cauldron? I need to get dressed for dinner tonight." Hermione stood up and turned toward the pub, but Ron took her hand and pulled her back down onto the bench.

"Dinner's not for a few hours. Do you really take that long to get dressed, Hermione? I never took you for a primpers."

Hermione sat in confusion. She had a bad feeling that Ron was going to "going to what, Hermione? Start telling you he loves you? You're getting married yourself in a few months. Don't you think he should know that?"

--

"Oh, of course I'm not. It's just that"

"What?"

She decided to just blurt it out. "Ron, I'm getting married."

The shock was evident. Ron forced his face into a smile. "Wow, that's great, Hermione! I had no idea!" Hermione suddenly felt a tidal wave of nausea rush over her. She fought to catch her breath. "What's going on?" she wondered. Her chest contracted, and she felt that any moment, she would find herself having to throw up.

"Ron. Um I think I need to get back to the hotel. Now." Hermione wrapped her arms around her stomach, searching for a reason why she should be feeling so violently ill.

"Sure. What's wrong? Was the food bad? Are you okay?" Ron helped her to her feet and half carried her down the street.

"We ate the same thing. Are you feeling sick, too?"

"Not really. It's nothing I ate, anyway." Hermione thought she heard a little quaver in his voice.

"Ron, I don't know if I can make it to my room. Help me get to this bench, and you go get Tom the innkeeper! And can you tell him to get in touch with Carlos to tell him I won't be making it back tonight?" Hermione gasped as another pain ripped through her body.

"No. I'll take you there myself." Ron picked her up in his arms and started walking quickly towards the Leaky Cauldron. Hermione put her head on his shoulder. "What is doing this to me?" she asked herself. "I feel like I'm going to die!"

--

Ron whipped out his wand as he tapped the wall in back of the pub. As soon as it was wide enough, he edged in sideways, rushing up to the back door, then kicking it violently. The innkeeper slowly opened the door, obviously surprised to see someone abusing his property this way, but then stepped back as Ron briskly walked in.

"Which room is Ms. Granger staying in, Tom?"

"210, Mr. Weasley." Tom looked mystified.

"Fine. Ms. Granger isn't feeling well, so I'm just going to put her to bed. Would you call the medics for me, Tom? And then I want you to get in touch with her friend in Chile â€" do you know who I mean?"

"Of course. The young lady's fiancÃ©. We've been getting owls from him for two days now."

Hermione cried out in pain, and Ron's face pinched up in suppressed emotion. "Right, he's the one. Tell him to come pick her up right away and take her home." Ron took the steps up to Hermione's room three at a time, pushed the door open with his hip, then put her gently on the bed. Her face was glistening with sweat and her jaw was clenched as she fought to hold back the bile that was rising in her throat.

"Ron?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Is Carlos coming?"

"Of course he is."

Hermione curled up in bed in the fetal position, whimpering softly to herself.

"Thank you Ron." She grabbed hold of Ron's hand, and then fainted.

* * *

Disclaimer: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling, except for Carlos and Professor Hicks. They're figments of my imagination, and are not meant to resemble anyone real, alive or dead. Plot (what plot? Hehe) is mine. _

A/N: sorry about the weird text problem at the end. MSWord is really messing up my html files, and it's not getting spaced right. I'll try to fix that for the next/last one. Hope you like it, and please, read and review!

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3. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Seasons of Discovery, Part Three

Seasons of Discovery, Part Three.

The doctors never came up with a good reason why Hermione had become so sick that day. There was nothing physically wrong with her. They checked for all the possible diseases. Then they checked for curses and spells. Nothing. Hermione, still feeling ill, stayed in bed until it was time for her to go back to Chile. Carlos, who had come to London the moment Tom the inkeeper had reached him, helped her Apparate to their camp, and she went back to her tent to sleep it off. Weeks passed until she was able to work full-time. When Professor Hicks finally told her she could go back to work, she threw herself into it. _I am so far behind_, she thought. She worked day

and night without resting until bedtime. She snapped at everyone. Carlos was so stunned at the change in his fiancée, he decided to take a few weeks off and visit his relatives. She didn't really care. It was surprising how little she cared about anything. _It must be the result of my illness,_ she decided. Oh well. Work was coming along better than expected. The hours and hours of study and research were finally paying off. It was a big day when she finally came to Professor Hicks' tent to tell her that she'd mapped out the entire cave system in the local area and had found an unusual fungi growing on the walls inside one of the caverns. The discovery made headlines. Hermione had found a previously unknown form of fungus. The possibilities for its use were endless. Hermione tried to be happy about it. After all, she would probably graduate early because of this. Try as she might, she couldn't. All she wanted to do was to go back to her tent and finally catch up on her sleep.

When Carlos came back to the camp, he and Hermione were arguing within fifteen minutes of his arrival. She was still working all day putting the finishing touches on her research paper, and he wanted to take her on a picnic to celebrate his return.

"Carlos, please. I'm up to my neck in work. I can't leave right now. Why don't you go by yourself."

"Sweetheart, I came back to camp to be with you. Now you tell me I cannot be with you? Is work so important?"

"Work is everything to me."

Carlos looked at her sadly. "My love, you cannot mean that. Am I really nothing to you?"

Hermione sat at her folding desk silently. She turned to Carlos and spat, "You left me here alone when I needed somebody to be with me! I was sick and you deserted me. And now you think I should give up everything I worked so hard for just because you decided to come back to me?"

"You told me to leave! I would come in every morning, and you would say to me 'get out!' So I did!"

"If you had really loved me, you would have stayed with me anyway." Hermione knew that this was cruel, but it came out before she could stop herself.

Carlos stood at the entrance to her tent, a blank look on his face. "So. What do you want me to do now? Tell me, and I will do it."

Hermione turned back to her desk. She picked up her quill and dipped it into her inkwell. Slowly and deliberately, she began to write on her parchment again. After five minutes of silence, she stopped. "Just leave," she whispered. Carlos turned around and walked out of her tent. After dinner that evening, Professor Hicks told Hermione that Carlos had resigned as camp guide and had left that afternoon. She went back to her tent and lay in her sleeping bag, a couple of tears running down her temples into her hair. _He left me again,_ she thought. _I doubt he'll be coming back this time._ With that thought floating through her mind, she drifted slowly off to sleep.

* * *

That January, while the rest of the camp was taking a dip in the lake to cool off from the heat of summer one morning, an owl flew into Hermione's tent and dropped a letter on her cot. It was the invitation to Harry and Ginny's wedding. _I'd better ask for time off now. The wedding is only three months away._ She finished the reading she had been doing. As soon as the group had come back to their tents, she went to find Professor Hicks. It didn't take very long.

The early afternoon sun was already beating down on Hermione's neck. She ducked into the professor's tent and wiped the sweat from her eyes. Sometimes she wished she were back in England, where the summers were more mild. She walked up to her mentor and cleared her throat. Professor Hicks turned around. "Ah, Hermione! Sit down, sit down. Here, have some lemonade. I just made it."

Hermione thanked her and took the glass. She sipped some of the cool liquid, then spoke. "Professor Hicks, I'd like to ask for vacation leave in April. I'm expected to be the maid of honor in a wedding. Would that be okay?"

"I'm so glad you finally asked me for time off, Hermione. I just wish it could be sooner than three months from now. Take all the time you need. You know your work is pretty much done here. It's all just paperwork until the end of term." Professor Hicks smiled at her.

"Thanks. Speaking of paper " Hermione stopped dead. Her head started pounding. She suddenly seemed to be floating in a mist of some kind. A very familiar object rushed past her eyes, making her flinch. _This is very strangeâ€|was that a broomstick? _Her world swirled in front of her for a moment, then went blank.

* * *

"Harry?" It couldn't be Harry. Harry was in England. Harry was getting married. Wait, that wasn't for a long time. But here he was. Was she in England? "Is it really you? Where am I?"

Harry was looking terrible. He had purple circles under his eyes, and his hair looked like it hadn't been washed in days. "Oh, Hermione! I was so worried. I didn't think I could stand it if I lost both of youâ€|" He broke into sobs and put his face in his hands.

"Both of us? What's wrong? Has something happened?" She felt light-headed.

"Hermioneâ€|" Harry choked back his tears and cleared his throat. "Hermione, Ron's been in an accident. He was hit in the head by a bludger and fell 50 feet off his broom. The doctors have done all they can, and they say their treatments usually would cure a person in a matter of days, but Ron's not responding well. They wanted me to come get you so that you couldâ€| that you couldâ€|" He broke down again. "So you could say g-g-goodbye."

Hermione gasped. Ron? Dying? She had to get to him. She had to see him one last time.

"Let's go, Harry. Right now. We can't waste any more time."

* * *

"Ron? Can you hear me?" Hermione found Ron's hand under the sheets and held it. His face looked so strange under the bandages. Why wasn't he responding to the treatment? "Ron, please wake up. Please. We're all so worried about you. Please come back to us." Tears welled up in her eyes. What would she do if he didn't come back? "Please, Ron. Come back to me."

The door creaked open and Mrs. Weasley poked her head into the room. She looked as though she hadn't slept in ages. Hermione put Ron's hand back by his side and went to his mother. They held each other for what seemed like hours. Finally breaking apart, they both sat side by side next to Ron.

"I'm so glad you came to see him. I think he would be glad that you traveled all this way to be with him." Mrs. Weasley sat and stared at her son. Her tears had dried up hours ago — she just couldn't cry anymore.

"I couldn't stay away, Molly, you know that. Would it hurt too much to tell me what exactly happened? Harry was going to tell me, but when we got back, he went to comfort Ginny, and I haven't had any time to talk to him." Hermione had had some strange thoughts ever since she'd come back to England, and she needed to know some specifics about Ron's accident.

"I don't know much about what happened. The manager told me they were just wrapping up their evening practice when the accident occurred. One of the reserve beaters just whacked a good one at Ronny's head, and he was too late to avoid it. He said something about Ron not concentrating as well lately —" said it'd been going on for a few months. He had been acting a little down, but I couldn't imagine why. Anyway, that's all I know." Mrs. Weasley sighed and brushed a lock of Ron's flaming hair back under the bandage it had escaped from.

"He was hit in the evening?" Hermione asked.

"Yes. Around six, I think."

Around six. Professor Hicks had told her that she'd collapsed in her office from her headache around two. There was a four hour time difference between Chile and England. Was it just a coincidence, or was it more?

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley. I think I need to get some air. It's been a while since I've been outside." Hermione grabbed her coat and slowly walked out into the hallway and to the street outside.

I collapsed at exactly the same time Ron had his accident. I was feeling ill back in June just after I told him about getting married. Ron's been acting distracted and depressed for months. I've been acting distracted and depressed for months, even though I should have been having the time of my life. Why? Could there be some connection between us? Something more than friendship? Hermione turned it over in her mind. For hours, she walked in the bitterly cold London streets. She loved Ron. She always had. She knew that now. She loved him so much that she shared his emotions and his physical pain. But

what if Ron died? Hermione had to force herself to consider the possibility. If Ron died, would she die? Or would she just be a body with half a soul?

When she finally found herself back at the hospital, she made her way up to Ron's room. His mother was gone. She pulled her seat right up to Ron's bed and leaned over his face. She started whispering. "Ron, I understand what's going on now. It took me a while, but I finally understand how you feel about me. I thought it was a crush. I thought it wasn't serious and that you'd get over it in time. I was wrong. I know now that it runs much deeper than that. And now I know that I love you, too. I've realized that I can't live without you. Please don't leave me here all alone. You have to get better. You have to. I don't know what I'd do without you." She sighed. No response. "Ron, when I told you I was getting married seven months ago, I think I broke your heart. I think that's why I got sick. I was feeling what you were feeling, even though I didn't know it. When you had your accident a few days ago, I passed out. My body knew yours had been hurt. I can't explain it, but we're connected, Ron. I think we're meant to be together." She could barely go on, but she had to say it. "Ron. I'm not getting married to Carlos. You know he's not the guy for me. Everyone only has one soulmate, and you're mine. I love you. Please come back to me."

There was no response, but somewhere inside, Hermione thought that he'd heard her. She decided to let him sleep. She picked up her bags and walked back through the biting wind back to The Leaky Cauldron.

She was awakened by Harry the next morning. His face said it all.

"Is he better?" Hermione bolted out of bed, throwing her dressing gown around her shoulders.

"The doctors said he's finally starting to improve! I can't believe it! I think he's going to make it, Hermione!" Harry threw his arms around her and squeezed her hard.

"I thought he would. I felt it last night."

* * *

When the doctors confirmed that Ron was definitely on the mend, Hermione said goodbye to her friends and went back to Chile. She wanted to have some time to herself to think about what had just happened. It was just too overwhelming for her to stay. She busied herself with her paperwork, wanting to finish before she left for Harry and Ginny's wedding. When she left Chile the next time, she'd be going home for good.

* * *

Hermione stood in her gown, fiddling with her bouquet. She still hadn't seen Ron since she'd come back to England two weeks ago. She'd asked Ginny about him when she'd been measured for her bridesmaid's dress, but she said she'd been too distracted to pay attention to much lately, and she didn't know where he'd been. Well, Hermione knew exactly where he was now. Just beyond those doors, he was at the front of the chapel, alternately mingling with the guests in the

first few rows and calming Harry's nerves. She'd seen him herself when she'd peeked through the doors a few minutes ago. He looked as handsome as ever, although he still looked a little pale at times. She felt herself wanting to go smooth down his hair and give him a glass of water to drink. No. She couldn't do that! He mustn't see her until the wedding. Oh wait. That was the bride. She was getting a little ahead of herself here. Her mind started racing and filled with "what ifs". What if he'd finally gotten over her? What if he hadn't heard her that night in the hospital? She hadn't been feeling sick or depressed since thenâ€¦ what if? She pushed it out of her mind. _Now is not the time to be thinking about it. The music is about to start._

As the organ played and the other two bridesmaids walked down the aisle, the butterflies in Hermione's stomach went mad. _What if he doesn't love me anymore?_ The thought just kept going through her mind. Okay, it was her turn. She took a deep breath, and entered the room.

Hermione kept her head up and her eyes down the entire trip up to the altar. She just couldn't bring herself to look him in the eyes, even when Ron came to meet her halfway. When they reached the end of the aisle, she looked up at Harry gave him a wink. He winked back. She slowly turned around, whispering a couple of words to the other two bridesmaids, then smiling as she heard the organist start the wedding march for Ginny. _Whew_, she thought. _Nobody's looking at me anymore._ She stood by and watched the girl come slowly up the altar with absolute bliss radiating from her face. _I wonder what it will be like when it's my turnâ€¦_ her whole face turned pink and she looked down. She shouldn't have worried, though. Only one person saw it.

Before it seemed possible, the ceremony was over, and Harry and Ginny were hand in hand, starting down the aisle. As she followed them and came to the center of the aisle, Ron joined her and took her arm. His fingers felt cool on her arm â€" she knew that touch so well. Instantly, her arms were covered in goose bumps.

"Hello, Hermione." Such a little phrase. A shiver went down her spine.

"Hello, Ron." Hermione didn't know how she'd managed to get even that much out.

"Beautiful ceremony, wasn't it?"

"Er, yes it was."

"Well, I'll see you at the reception. I have to take care of some business before I leave." And as she was ushered into the lobby of the church, he was gone. Hermione felt like sobbing. He obviously didn't love her anymore. His cool attitude to her was proof. She was just a friend to him, nothing more. She wiped the tears from her eyes as she stepped up into the carriage that would bear her to the hall where the reception was to be held.

Things didn't seem to improve once she got there. She knew that Ron was there â€" she'd seen him talking to Percy over by the hors d'oeuvres table a half an hour before, but she had no idea where he was now. Then, just as she'd gotten up the nerve to start looking for

him, Lavender Brown had collared her near the bar and had dragged her over to an empty table. She tried to listen, but every once in a while she would see a flash of red hair above the crowd and become distracted. What was Lavender saying? Oh, something about Dean. _I guess he's avoiding me. Well, why not? After what happened last June, he couldn't think that I cared about him now. No wonder he doesn't want to be near me. I wouldn't want to be near me either. _How much of this torture could she take? Even when Hagrid had come over to say hello, she was in agony. She thought she had just seen Ron, but it turned out just to be his older brother Charlie. _Why do they all have to look so much alike? _She heard the band leader announce that it was time for the bride and groom to dance. _Good, I can leave soon. I just have to make it through one more dance. Oh, if only it didn't have to be with Ron. I don't know how I'm going to survive those few minutes alone with him. Being in his arms and knowing I won't get to stay there " it'll be awful._ She put her bouquet down on the chair next to her and waited. Lavender was still talking. Hermione felt like slapping her. Couldn't she keep her big mouth shut? Couldn't she see she didn't care about Dean preferring chicken to fish?

The music finally stopped. She heard the band start up the next song, saying something about the attendants dancing. This was it. Finally, the right red head was walking in her direction. _Here he comes,_ thought Hermione. _Well, let's look cheerful and get it over with._

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_Ron slowly walked up to the group and bent his head down to Hermione's. Her chest tightened. "Hello again, Hermione. I suppose this is our dance. We'd better make the best of this." _Oh, couldn't he at least pretend? Why is this such a nightmare? He doesn't even want to dance this one dance with me!_

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"Yes, I guess we should." Hermione took his offered arm and walked out onto the dance floor with him. The tears she'd been trying so hard to hide were winning the battle. A few slid down her cheeks. Ron put his arms around her and they started to sway to the music. _If only he still loved me. I was just too late, _Hermione thought, and another tear fell onto the floor. Her chest hitched with a repressed sob.

"So, I haven't had a chance to tell you before -- Hey" are you crying?" Ron lifted her chin up to look into her face. Though the light was dim, he could see her eyes shining in the candlelight.

"I'm sorry. I know I should be happy, Ron, but" well, can we just get this dance over and done with? I really want to go home." Hermione stifled a small sob, and looked back down at her feet.

"Why would you want to leave? We'd all be so disappointed if you left, you know."

"Ron, stop. You're just saying that. Nobody's going to miss me."

"I'd miss you."

Hermione caught her breath. _He's just being polite._ "Yeah, rightâ€¦" she muttered under her breath.

"Hermione, let's sit down. I don't care if the song is still playing. I want to tell you a story." _A story?_ Well, anything was better than this. Ron put his arm around her shoulder and steered her to an empty corner of the room.

"A long time ago, this boyâ€¦ oh, forget it. A long time ago, Hermione, I thought I'd fallen in love with you. You didn't know, and I tried not to let you find out. I think you did, though. I couldn't help myself. You had always been so smart, so cute, soâ€¦ oh, I don't know. I just thought you were the only one I could ever love." Ron paused. Hermione put her hands up to hide her face. _Oh, this is worse than I could ever have imagined, _she thought.

"And now you want to tell me how dumb you were and how you'll always love me â€" as a friend. I know. Ron, you didn't have to pull me aside to tell me this. I really need to go home now. I have to get out of here â€" " Hermione stood up to leave, but Ron held her hand tightly and wouldn't let go.

"Hermione, shut up! You always did think you knew everything. Just shut up and sit down and listen, for once! I said I thought I'd fallen in love with you before. I know now that I didn't know what love was until that night in the hospital when you told me that you loved me. You're not just the only one I could ever love, Hermione â€" you're the other half of my soul."

"You heard me?" Hermione looked into his eyes.

"Oh, Hermione. You know I did. You felt it in your heart. When I saw you this morning walking down the aisle, you were walking towards me. We were the only two people alive up there, you know. Just don't tell Harry and Ginny â€" they'd kill me."

Hermione smiled, then frowned. "Ron, why didn't you tell me this earlier today? I've been feeling miserable ever since you were so cool to me after the ceremony."

Ron smiled. "Just getting you back."

"What?!?" Hermione punched him.

"Ouch! Just kidding! I was so nervous I didn't know what to say! You looked so beautiful, I didn't think any of it could be real. I thought I must have dreamed everything I heard that night in the hospital. There was no way that someone so perfect could actually love me." Hermione punched him again. "Well, it's true! Then I watched you from across the room before our dance. I must have watched you for half an hour. You sat next to Lavender looking daggers at her, wiping tears from your eyes, and my heart started beating again. I started dreaming again. So when it was our turn to dance, I came over, wishing that we didn't have to dance here in front of all these people. I wanted us to be all alone, just you and me. I wanted to get this stupid dance over with so that we could finally be together."

"Oh." Hermione sighed and looked up at Ron. She brushed the hair out of his eyes.

"Is that all you're going to say? 'Oh?' Come on, I need something more than that, Hermione." Ron smiled down at Hermione's tear-stained face.

"That's all I'm going to say." But Hermione took Ron's face in her hands and pulled it slowly down to hers. She pressed her lips to his.

"I love you, Ron."

"You don't know how long I've waited to hear that. I love you, too, Hermione."

Ron took her in his arms and kissed her, and the world around them vanished. They were finally together, all alone. Nothing else mattered.

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Disclaimer: all characters (except Prof. Hicks and Carlos) belong to J.K. Rowling. The other two are mine.

A/N: Okay, here it is. Last part. Please review although if you're going to tell me that I've ended a lot of my sentences with "dangling participles", don't worry, I know that already. The end scene didn't quite go exactly how I wanted it to, but it's not bad. And I wanted to give Hermione's relationship with Carlos more attention (so that it would seem possible that they'd be getting married), but I couldn't get it to fit in right. Not only that, but their breakup seems a bit forced. I had to get him out of the way, though, so there ya go. Anyway, if you want to review, please do, and I'll take your comments and revise at a later date. Hope you liked it! It was my first attempt at fanfic!

—

End
file.